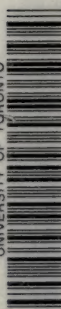


UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO



3 1761 01502529 9

Bradley, Andrew Cecil
The reaction against
Tennyson

PR
5588
B65
cop.2

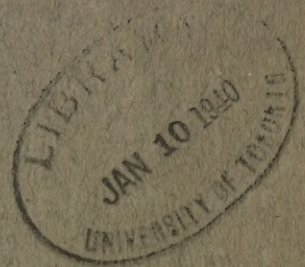
THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 39

The Reaction against Tennyson

By
André
A. C. Bradley (1851-)

*T., Alfred T., 1st Baron
(1809-1892)*



December, 1917

A copy of this pamphlet is supplied to all full members of the Association. They can obtain further copies (price 1s.) on application to the Secretary, Mr. A. V. Houghton, Imperial College Union, South Kensington, London, S.W.

The following Publications have been issued by the Association, and those still in print can be purchased by members :—

1907-17.

1. Types of English Curricula in Boys' Secondary Schools.
(Out of print.) Price 6d.
2. The Teaching of Shakespeare in Secondary Schools (Provisional suggestions).
(Out of print.) Price 1d.
3. A Short List of Books on English Literature from the beginning to 1832, for the use of Teachers.
Price 6d. (to Associate Members, 1s.).
4. Shelley's View of Poetry. By A. C. Bradley, Litt.D.
(Out of print.) Price 1s.
5. English Literature in Secondary Schools. By J. H. Fowler, M.A. Price 6d.
6. The Teaching of English in Girls' Secondary Schools. By Miss G. Clement, B.A. (Out of print.) Price 6d.
7. The Teaching of Shakespeare in Schools. Price 6d.
8. Types of English Curricula in Girls' Secondary Schools.
(Out of print.) Price 6d.
9. Milton and Party. By Professor O. Elton, M.A.
(Out of print.) Price 6d.
10. Romance. By W. P. Ker, LL.D. Price 6d.
11. What still remains to be done for the Scottish Dialects.
By W. Grant. Price 6d.
12. Summary of Examinations in English affecting Schools.
Price 6d.
13. The Impersonal Aspect of Shakespeare's Art. By Sidney Lee, D.Litt. Price 1s.
14. Early Stages in the Teaching of English.
(Out of print.) Price 6d.
15. A Shakespeare Reference Library. By Sidney Lee, D.Litt.
Price 1s.
16. The Bearing of English Studies upon the National Life.
By C. H. Herford, Litt.D. Price 1s.

T 312
.469

THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 39



The Reaction against
Tennyson

By

532772
22.1.52

Andrew Cecil
A. C. Bradley

December, 1917



Oxford

Printed by Frederick Hall, at the University Press

PR
5588
B65
cop. 2

THE REACTION AGAINST TENNYSON¹

WHEN he died, in 1870, Dickens was still at the height of his fame. The public idolized him, and critical readers, though they had a good deal to say against him, did not question his greatness. Some twenty years later, however, a decided change was visible, chiefly among such readers and especially among the younger men of letters. It was more than a cooling of enthusiasm: it was a strong reaction. Certain defects of the novelist were keenly felt, and all the more keenly because it seemed that his immense popularity had been largely due to them. To decry Dickens, even to protest that you could not read him, became a fashion and a mark of being up to date in taste. In this reaction two curious traits might be noticed. One was the belief that Dickens's faults were a new discovery and had never been suspected in his lifetime. The other was still stranger, and much more important. The dislike of his faults appeared often to kill the power of perceiving and enjoying his virtues. Because you could not abide the death of Paul Dombey or Little Nell, you listened to Sam Weller and Mrs. Gamp without a smile.

This was the nadir of Dickens's star. After a time it rose again. The wholesome work of reaction was finished. In the more literary sections of the public, and among men of letters, there is now a fairly general agreement about him. His defects, by no means unimportant in quality and quantity, are simply taken for granted; but his astonishing genius is fully recognized, and his almost inexhaustible creations are as keenly enjoyed as they were fifty years ago. The best critique of his works written in the first decade of this century came, not from an old stager, but from Mr. Chesterton. And now, if you are unable to read Dickens and yet wish to be in the literary swim, you must either hold your tongue about him or tell lies about yourself.

This story, down to a certain stage in it, has exactly repeated itself in the case of Tennyson—a writer less astonishing in genius and much less faulty in art. At the time of his death, some five-and-twenty

¹ A lecture given to members of the Association in Birmingham, Manchester, and London.

years ago, he was immensely popular; and of a large part of the public it may fairly be said that it did not recognize his weaknesses and even liked them. After a while, in small circles, the reaction began, and it has spread, and, so far as it has spread, is now intense. The nadir of his fame may not quite be reached, but it can hardly be far off. To care for his poetry is to be old-fashioned, and to belittle it is to be in the movement. And those curious traits of the Dickens reaction have reappeared, the first of them in a more amusing shape. The mid-Victorian, a figure amply proving the creative energy of Georgian imagination, is supposed to have been blind to Tennyson's defects, though the actual surviving mid-Victorian rarely hears a sane word about them which was not familiar to him in his youth. And —what really matters—the antipathy to these defects seems in some cases to have so atrophied the power of enjoyment that Tennyson's weakest poems and his best meet with the same indifference or contempt, and a reader will remain unmoved by lines which, if he were ignorant of their authorship, he would hail with delight.

The loss of such delight is a heavy one, and ingratitude is not a pretty vice; but otherwise the reaction against Tennyson is not, on the whole, a matter for regret. It was necessary, for one thing, in the interests of poetry itself. For the formal characteristics of his style were easily caught, and Tennysonian minor poetry, if less absurd than Byronic minor poetry, was quite as sickening; so that those who admire him most can only rejoice that no trace of his influence remains in the poetry of the present day. Besides, his popularity in the last twenty or thirty years of his life made the public unjust to other living poets, and he was over-estimated even by some good critics; and in such cases (George Eliot's is another) some reaction is both natural and wholesome. It hastens, also, that sifting process to which the works of all poets have to submit (unless, like Sappho's, they are almost all lost). The result of that process is that a part of the works is separated out and continues to be widely read or, as we say, to 'live', while the remainder passes more or less from public view and is explored only by lovers of the poet or students of literary history. This has already happened to Tennyson's immediate predecessors, and it is happening to him now. When the process is complete nobody troubles to dwell on the poet's defects, nobody is blinded by them to his merits, and it is possible to form a comparative estimate of his worth. The time for this has not yet come in Tennyson's case, and it will hardly come in my lifetime; but, if only for your entertainment, I will hazard a brief prophecy. I believe he will be considered the best poet of his own age, though not so much

the best as his own age supposed; and, while I have never thought that in native endowment he was quite the equal of the best of the preceding age, yet the distance, as it seems to me, is not wide; and, as he was blessed with long life, made (like Pope) the most of his gift, and in a wonderful degree retained and even developed it to the end, I do not doubt that his place will be beside them, and expect that the surviving portion of his work will not be smaller than what survives of theirs. But I am not going to offer reasons for this forecast, or to attempt an account of his merits, and still less to try to prove them. You cannot prove the merits of Sappho's fragments or of *King Lear* (which Tolstoi thought poor stuff); and I should not dream of disputing with some one who is indifferent, say, to *The Lotos-Eaters*. The dispute would end, at best, in nothing, and, at worst, in each of us saying aloud what he only said to himself at the beginning—that his opponent, so far as poetry is concerned, should for ever hold his peace. On the other hand, the reaction, in my view, is by no means wholly unjustified, and I propose later, without constant reference to it, to touch on certain features of Tennyson's poetry which partly justify it. Only first I must refer to what I think mere follies that appear in this reaction; and I will begin with one or two that are connected with his former immense popularity.

Short poems that are very popular and so are frequently quoted or mentioned become, as we say, *hackneyed*; and then we are in danger of thinking them commonplace. But if a poem is very popular because it is very good, its becoming *hackneyed* for us is entirely our affair. It remains what it was, but we through our weakness cannot get at it. Our imagination, our feelings, our ears, act so feebly as we read it that what we read is, in fact, not *it*, but a degraded copy of it. Now and then the newspaper critic of a concert may be found complaining that a Beethoven symphony is *hackneyed*: but a Beethoven symphony never became *hackneyed* to Wagner or Brahms, and what is really *hackneyed* is the critic's mind. And so I have met people who decried as *hackneyed* *Break, break, break*, and *Crossing the Bar*; and doubtless, if they cannot read these poems freshly, they do well not to read them at all. But as for the poems themselves, I think they are as sure of immortality as anything in the language.

'But', some one perhaps will answer, 'they are spoilt for me because they have been taken to the heart of the great middle class, with its nauseous sentiment, domestic and religious. One of them—or a misquotation from one of them—is engraved on tombstones, and

the other has now been added to *Hymns Ancient and Modern.* Well, these uses of the poems may be fitting or unfitting; but, however that may be, one does not cease to love daffodils because the public loves them. And there are two ways of being a slave to the public. One is to be afraid to differ from it, and the other to be afraid to agree with it.

Again; the popularity of a poem may be due in part to its defects; and then those who see this sometimes make a great mistake and imagine that other poems of the author, also popular and in certain ways resembling the first, have the same defects. For example, the *May-Queen* poems used to be extremely popular, and they were so partly for a bad reason. They contain lovely lines, and stanzas that would be perfect if only the voice were not the poet's instead of the child's; but their pathos, besides being too obvious, is mingled with a sickly and even false sentiment. The same defect appears more or less in other great writers of that day. The best writers of earlier and also of later days are free from it, and it rightly offends us. But that is no excuse for talking as if the *May-Queen* poems were typical of Tennyson; and what are we to think of critics who, perceiving that *The Grandmother* also deals with rustic and domestic life, imagine that it has the same defects and is on the same level as the *May-Queen* poems? And if, again, in modernizing some of the Arthurian stories, Tennyson did them an injury, it scarcely follows without inquiry that in modernizing others he injured them too, or that it is sensible to dismiss the *Idylls of the King* in a lump with contempt.

Let us pass to matters of more weight. The root of the reaction against Tennyson among capable readers of the new generation is, we are told, that his ideas do not appeal to them—neither the more explicit ideas, sometimes called the 'philosophy', found in *In Memoriam* and elsewhere, nor the ideas or way of regarding life implicit in many other poems. This is probably true, and, if this were all, there would be little or nothing in the fact to cause surprise or regret. The statement would hold good of the ideas of Carlyle, and, with some modification, of those of Ruskin and Browning. They all permeated, more or less, the minds of several generations, and, doubtless losing something in the process, became an atmosphere surrounding the mind of the present; and an atmosphere, however wholesome, cannot well have the charm of novelty. But every generation naturally asks for novelty; and, further, the ideas and the literature of times immediately preceding its own are apt to be the least interesting of all to it, because they have less novelty for it

than those of periods more distant, and may even be felt, as those more distant ideas are not, to be a prison from which it is necessary to escape. This, no doubt, is a wise provision of Nature to ensure progress, and it would be foolish to complain of it, even though its result is that the full meaning of the ideas in question is lost for a time and remains to be re-discovered when they have ceased to be familiar.

There is little I need say about the attitude of the reaction towards Tennyson's 'philosophical' ideas, but I cannot say it without interposing a word of protest. Harm has been done by those who have spoken of his 'philosophy', whether to exalt or to belittle it. He was not a philosopher, any more than Wordsworth was, or Browning, or Meredith, though he shows, I think, more signs than they do of the gift that makes a philosopher. And he, like them, is happier when he simply expresses his ideas, with the emotions that accompany them, than when he argues about them, or attempts to systematize them; happier in *The Ancient Sage* and *The Higher Pantheism* and certain passionate sections of *In Memoriam* than in certain other sections of that poem, just as Browning is happier in *Rabbi ben Ezra* or *Prospice* than in *La Saisiaz*, and Wordsworth in *Tintern Abbey* than in the most analytical passages of *The Prelude*. Coleridge might perhaps have discussed with profit, in prose, the question whether that which Wordsworth found in Nature was found there or put there; but, even if this question were suitable for verse at all, Wordsworth was not competent to discuss it. Neither Tennyson nor Browning offers, I believe, any argument for personal immortality that had not been stated in preciser terms and more complete connexion by philosophers; but their passion for this belief made fine poetry, and far more impressive to me than their arguments in support of it is the bare fact (whatever it may point to) that two minds so much superior to my own could make no sense of the world without it.

I come now to the 'philosophical' ideas, as distinguished from the arguments, that lay nearest to Tennyson's heart. One of them was that just mentioned. A second was the idea of human progress on the earth—the faith that man, through a process lasting for thousands or millions of years, is developing into something infinitely greater than he was at first, and even that 'the whole creation' is moving to 'some divine event'. Of this second idea I shall say nothing, because, whatever the attitude of the 'reaction' may be in regard to it, Tennyson's attitude does not appear to be a source of irritation. The third may be called the idea of God; but it would be better,

I think, to call it the idea of the ultimate power, because the main source of Tennyson's interest in this idea seems to me to have lain in its bearing on the other two. The main source, that is to say, was not so much the strictly religious impulse to adore as the need to be satisfied that, since the ultimate power in the universe is clearly not man, this power,

He, They, One, All ; within, without ;
The Power in darkness whom we guess,

is of such a nature as to value highest what man at his best values highest, and therefore to ensure his progress both on earth and elsewhere. And that need, we should observe, was for Tennyson peculiarly imperative. Like his great predecessors, he may be called a poet of Nature, but with a difference. For Wordsworth and Shelley the spirit of Nature, we may roughly say,¹ is wholly beautiful, good, and unhampered, while in man this same spirit is thwarted; and struggles against ugliness and evil; and so Nature is, for them, a promise and almost a pledge of man's ultimate victory. But it could not be so for Tennyson. Though he wrote *In Memoriam* before the days of Darwin, he had fully realized and keenly felt the conflict, pain, and waste in Nature; so that it presented to him not a solution, but the same problem as man's life, and required the same further guarantee. Then (to look for a moment beyond *In Memoriam*), as years went by, this need became still more insistent, because the advance of science and the theory of evolution (both of which he welcomed) had, however unjustifiably, made materialism a popular magazine-philosophy, and this philosophy again, in Tennyson's view, was in part responsible for moral phenomena which he detested. This was unfortunate for him, partly because it alarmed and exasperated him and touched some of his poetry with the spirit of ephemeral controversy, and partly because it led unwise opponents to regard him as a reactionary, and unwise admirers to make claim for him as a philosophic teacher which he never made for himself.

To return to the reaction. I quite understand that *In Memoriam*, as regards its ideas, cannot appeal to readers now as it did to thousands in the generation before mine, or even in mine or the next after mine. But why *In Memoriam* and other poems, because of these ideas, should lose all interest for those who share in the reaction, I do not understand; and still less how any one can offer the explanation that these ideas, one or all, are so alien to his own that he cannot read the poems with enjoyment or even with patience.

¹ As regards Shelley the statement is not quite accurate.

That explanation, it seems to me, implies an altogether perverse attitude towards poetry or, for that matter, any other product of imagination.

I do not mean merely that a reader who is indifferent or hostile to the main ideas used in a poem ought to be able, in spite of this, to enjoy the beauty of its style and music. I mean that he ought to be able to adopt these ideas for the time, to identify himself imaginatively with them, to feel as his own the emotions that accompany them ; and, further, that unless he has done this he cannot fully appreciate the poem or, in the full sense of the word, read it. If, as I read Browning's *Cavalier Tunes*, my Roundhead sympathies prevent my feeling like a Cavalier, how can I read the *Tunes* with any gusto ; and, read without gusto, are they themselves ? Are the Jolly Beggars to me what they are in the poem, if I refuse to be a Jolly Beggar for the moment and insist on remaining a member of a Charity Organization Committee ? And if this holds of poems like these, equally, or if possible even more, it holds of a poem like *In Memoriam*, which is concerned not with a past political conflict or a minor form of free enjoyment, but with something which has been, is, and always must be, the centre of men's doubts, fears, hopes, or convictions about themselves and the world, and which, in a variety of shapes, may even be said to form the ultimate subject of all great philosophies and religions and of most of the greatest poems. In *In Memoriam* it takes a particular shape. } There is a large and beautiful soul—for all who know it, a pre-eminently large and beautiful soul ; for them, therefore, something of the highest value : and suddenly, with all its promise unfulfilled, it appears to vanish like the rainbow of a minute, and therefore to have no more value than the rainbow for the ultimate power. Can this be really so ? † Again : this power, as Job believes, is the friend of the man who tries to do its will ; yet Job, who knows—and, for the author of the poem, truly knows—that, imperfect as he is, he has tried with all his heart to do that will, is treated like a defiant rebel : how can this be ? ‡ Again : God is perfect goodness and power ; how is it, then, that Satan and his host exist, and that man, who was made in God's image, has lost his Paradise ; and how, once more, that countless images of God appear to walk their way to Purgatory or to Hell ? And, whether visibly or no, the same mystery haunts all great tragedy and even great works not tragic. Was ever soul nobler than Antigone's or Othello's ; yet what becomes of them ? And if Don Quixote's soul was no less noble, why was it the prey of delusions and a butt for vulgar insult ? Well, then, when I read the *Book of Job*, the *Divine Comedy*, or the *Antigone*, surely

I do not say, 'These ideas about God or Zeus or Heaven and Hell are not my ideas and clash with mine, and therefore I cannot enter into them'. On the contrary, I do enter into them and feel in them the same problem and the same passion that belong to my own ideas, truer perhaps than they, but unlikely perhaps to be the unveiled truth. And if I did anything else, what would you call me? A man with no literary education; or else a man with a literary education, but—stupid.

We may pass now from what I have called mere follies of the reaction to consider characteristics of Tennyson's poetry which, at any rate in some degree, seem to justify it. And I will begin with the moral content or spirit of the poetry.

This, we hear it said, is conventional. If that charge meant, as it ought to mean, that Tennyson's morality was a thing of use and wont, taken up without personal conviction from the social atmosphere around him, it would be ridiculous. He was himself about as unconventional as a decent citizen can be, and the moral ideas in his poetry are plainly matters of intense conviction. But it is true that there is nothing startling in them, and little that would even be arresting apart from the poems themselves. Here he resembles Dickens and Thackeray rather than Browning and Meredith. Further, the ideas or, let me say, the virtues that he cares about most are mainly of one type: self-control, self-sacrifice, faithfulness, loyalty to law and to obligations personal and social, patriotism, and the like. They are not, with Tennyson, ascetic virtues; but, if we use the slippery antithesis of order and progress, we may call them the virtues of order.¹ The 'moral' of the *Lotos-Eaters* (if under protest we use the word) is that the law of life is labour, and that to reject it is to lose all that makes life worth living and to imagine gods as idle and selfish as yourself. The *Palace of Art* tells us that the self-centred uncreative enjoyment of beauty is poison to the soul; the *Vision of Sin*, that abandonment to sensual excitement leads to cynicism and incapacity to enjoy anything at all; *Love and Duty*, that, where these clash, love, even at its best, must give way. The pursuit of the Beatific Vision, we hear in the *Holy Grail*, is for a Galahad or a Percivale here and there; and the Vision comes to Bors, who could not care to see it unless Lancelot might see it too; but wellnigh all the Knights, and even the King himself, are here on

¹ Tennyson would have objected to this. 'Progress' for him meant moving upward, working out the beast, the slave of mere instinct and impulse; and those virtues are fundamental forms of this working out.

earth, not to spend their force in seeking it, but to right human wrongs.

The poems which enshrine these ideas certainly do not lack originality, and the significance of the ideas themselves is not easily exhausted; but of course they do not arrest the reader's attention in at all the same degree as the ideas contained in not a few poems by Browning, Arnold, or Rossetti. Nor do they resemble ideas which are popular now, or at least were popular three years ago. The idea, for instance, that the business of life is to develop one's individuality is foreign to Tennyson, and he would not have been sympathetic towards it, I imagine, even in the rare cases where there is much individuality to develop. Again, there is the view of life as an adventure. It may not be a profound view, but unquestionably there are virtues of adventure, and in Tennyson's poetry they hardly get their due. He is not, indeed, unsympathetic here, but he feels strongly the perils of the adventurous temper. 'God help me', cries his sailor-boy,

God help me! save I take my part
Of danger on the roaring sea,
A devil rises in my heart
Far worse than any death to me.

The sailor-lad worked his devil out, or used it up, in that way; and if Tennyson had written the poem later, he would probably have sent him into the Navy. The poor wild youth in *Rizpah* came to a bad end, and Tennyson makes the mother say:

The king should have made him a soldier; he would have
been one of the best.

It is hard, he seems to tell us, for such spirits to find their place in the social order, and yet, if they cannot do so, they are apt to make havoc of their own lives and the lives of others. There are other poems of Tennyson's, no doubt, which breathe the spirit of adventure in a much higher sense of that word: *Ulysses*, for example, or *Merlin and the Gleam*. And the first of these is one of his very best, and the second one of his latest and most personally characteristic. But (though this does not injure the poem) the 'idea' in *Ulysses* is adopted from Dante; and neither the adventure in the other poem, nor yet that portrayed in *In Memoriam*, is of the kind that would appeal to the reaction or soften its heart to Tennyson.

There seems to be a notion that Tennyson was from the first popular. In reality it was long before he became so. After the

volumes of 1842, no doubt, he was generally regarded by literary readers as the first of living poets; but even those volumes did not make him popular, nor yet did *The Princess*, or *In Memoriam*, or the *Maud* volume. It was the four *Idylls of the King* published in 1859 that opened to him the heart of the public and began that immense popularity which he never saw diminished. On the other hand, FitzGerald was disappointed with every volume that appeared after 1842, and held that Tennyson never fulfilled the promise of early days; those very *Idylls* of 1859 were a rock of offence to admirers like Swinburne and Meredith; and, to the reaction, the whole collection of *Idylls*, his most ambitious work, is probably the most obnoxious. Without considering the reaction in particular, I may connect with these facts some further remarks on Tennyson's limitations.

In one respect FitzGerald was, surely, quite wrong. It is true—or at any rate I do not deny—that after 1842 Tennyson wrote nothing of the same kind that was equal to the *Lady of Shalott*, or the *Lotos-Eaters*, or even *Mariana*; but in most, perhaps in all, of the non-dramatic volumes after 1842 there was, I should say, something of *another* kind quite equal to those poems, and I doubt if Meredith or Swinburne would have questioned this, or if any critic of repute would question it now. And yet most lovers of Tennyson's poetry, while sure that FitzGerald was so far wrong, still vaguely feel, I think, that the extraordinary promise of the early poems was never quite fulfilled. This fact seems puzzling, but the explanation seems to be that, rationally or not, we expect a man who writes first-rate short poems in his earlier life to write long ones at least as good in later years; and Tennyson failed to do this, none of his long poems being equal, as a whole, to the best of his short ones, early and late. Well, that would hold good of some other nineteenth-century poets, and I have tried elsewhere to point out general reasons for the fact. But what were the more special reasons in the case of Tennyson?

→ Let us take the *Idylls of the King*. They swarm with beautiful passages. Some of them, taken separately, I for my part continue to read with undiminished pleasure. But the whole, beyond doubt, fails to satisfy. There are various causes of the failure, affecting various readers in different degrees. Some readers are most displeased with certain defects of style, to which I will return. Some object most to Tennyson's morality; others to the element of allegory; others to his departure from the spirit of the old stories, or at any rate to his degradation of heroes like Tristram or Gawain. I feel all these objections more or less; and at the same time I do not think a poem can be too moral if its morality is sufficiently original or deep, and

I do not care how much allegory it contains, or how freely it treats its material, if the result is successful. In poetry, at all events, the end justifies the means. But in the morality and the allegorical meaning of the *Idylls* there is not much that is new, and what is new does not appear to deepen much the old. It fails to do so, I think, because Tennyson had not in any marked degree that universal interest in human nature, that penetrating insight into it, or that power of portraying it in uniquely individual forms, which belonged in different degrees to Shakespeare and to Browning. On what may be called the metaphysical or mystical side his mind was not simple, but in regard to human character it was. He could express perfectly certain feelings and moods, even passionate ones. He could depict admirably, in later years, such typical figures as the Grandmother and the Northern Farmer. But that is not enough for a long and wholly serious narrative, and it could not suffice for the *Idylls*, where the characters were to be modernized, and where, if the story was to have the effect of tragedy, it was especially important that the leading characters should be intensely imagined and thoroughly individual. This they are far from being. Guinevere is the most shadowy, and Lancelot the least; but Lancelot is not more individual than many heroes in novels of the second rank, and, although he is meant to be a large character, large as Othello and Antony are large, somehow he is not so. Arthur, again, in Tennyson's early *Morte d'Arthur*, is what he should be, because neither his relation to the lovers nor his semi-allegorical character comes in. But in the *Idylls* both come in, and the position is hopeless. He has in some measure to represent conscience; and then he is no person, and the relation of the lovers to him ceases to be personal. And yet he must be a person, a noble friend and a loving husband; and then we cannot give to the lovers the degree of sympathy which a tragic story demands. The result of all this is, to me, that, apart from the numberless beautiful passages in the *Idylls*, and apart from the *Passing of Arthur*, Tennyson succeeds most where the story makes but slight demands on the side of character (as in *Enid* and *Elaine*), and where the character interest is united with the mystical (as in the *Holy Grail*).

In *In Memoriam* this weakness of Tennyson's naturally does not appear. In *Maud* it is plain enough, but is not of much consequence. It matters little that neither Maud herself nor her brother is an individual, as each would have been if Browning had treated the subject. The hero, too, answers Tennyson's purpose sufficiently; but in his case the weakness in question is not quite unimportant, and one

Character

M. B.

Maud

L.H. feels there is something amiss. This hero, like the speakers in the two *Locksley Hall* poems, drew down on Tennyson both anger and ridicule. The anger was mainly due to his attitude, real or supposed, towards war, and I pass it by. But what is the cause of the ridicule? The hero in *Maud*, it is said, is a poor hysterical creature. 'Well,' one answers, 'he was meant to be, and why should he not be? He excites enough sympathy for the purpose, and he is not the hero of a great tragedy like *Hamlet*.' And yet this answer does not suffice. For one thing it is doubtful if Tennyson was aware how poor a creature the hero was. It is the same case as that of Stephen Guest in the *Mill on the Floss*, and that of Ladislav in *Middlemarch*. Some say that Maggie and Dorothea could not have been fascinated by such beings. I am sorry to say that I think this false; only I suspect that George Eliot herself was not heart-whole towards them. That is one thing; and another is this. When people took all the railing in *Maud* and the *Locksley Hall* poems for Tennyson's own railing, he justly protested. But, while they were clearly wrong in law, were they wholly wrong in fact? He once told his neighbour at a dinner-party that all the Tennysons were afflicted with black bile, and he dilated on this affliction with sufficient eloquence. Had it not something to do with the railing in those poems, and is it not this that we feel? And is not railing in literature a mistake? We may remember that the practice of railing distinguished two other great writers of that time, Carlyle and Ruskin, and that it diminished their influence. It has died out now: partly for good reasons, partly perhaps for the worst—that there is no prophet left in Israel.

In spite, however, of these defects, it remains true that, among the longer works, *Maud* and *In Memoriam* have the great advantage of not requiring original or intense conceptions of character. They have another. Though long, they are lyrical; and, if it would be absurd to class Tennyson with Herrick or Burns as simply or essentially a lyrical poet, one may still think that his style is most constantly and perfectly right when he is using lyrical forms. In particular, it is then, except in some of the earliest pieces, least open to the charge of elaborateness. This charge has been brought against Tennyson by good judges; most readers now feel, perhaps, that there is some ground for it; and I must refer to it briefly. As with other charges, so with this, it is necessary to distinguish. Tennyson rarely, perhaps never, 'pipes but as the linnets sing'. He does not attain, if he ever attempts, the artless air of the *Volslied* or of the best songs of Burns or of some of the Elizabethans. Nor again has his style, even in his simpler lyrics, the bare trenchant force which Wordsworth, and Byron

occasionally, could command. But 'elaborate' is surely not the appropriate word to apply to 'Break, break, break' or Crossing the Bar, to Rizpah or the Northern Farmer, to Boadicea or The Revenge, or even to 'Tears, idle tears' or 'The splendour falls',—and how easy it would be to extend this list of examples! In other and equally characteristic lyrical pieces—for instance, the Dream of Fair Women—the style is enriched, and may fairly be called elaborate. But then the word need bear no tinge of blame; it need not imply artifice, glossy polish, or irrelevant jewellery. And this holds good of many non-lyrical poems, such as Oenone or Lucretius. On the other hand, a good deal of the poetry, and especially, I think, of the narrative poetry, is elaborate either in a way or in a degree that is faulty. The defect is patent in cases where Tennyson makes most effort to be direct and plain (as in Dora, or again in Enoch Arden and in some of the English Idylls parodied by Calverley).¹ If again one turns from the Idylls of the King, I will not say to Chaucer, but to Morris or even to Arnold, one has at once a sense of relief and refreshment; and in the later Idylls, especially when the poet has to deal with matter that does not inspire him, one is conscious of effort and artifice and often of the mannerism to which they led. Now such defects (though they are not absent from In Memoriam) are much rarer in the lyrical verse, and therefore—to return to my point—it was an advantage to In Memoriam and Maud that they are lyrical. And Maud, on this side, is the superior. The stanza used in In Memoriam suits the poem admirably; but Maud has a much larger variety of metrical shapes, movements, and velocities; and the form of 'lyrical monodrama', where only one person of the drama speaks, but speaks always in a lyric, was perfectly adapted to the poet's genius. It seems to have been his own invention, and it has seldom been used since.²

¹ See Arnold's lectures On Translating Homer, Popular edition, pp. 161 ff.; and again Swinburne's Essays and Studies (1875), where Tennyson is frequently criticized without being named. If the 'reactionary' would consult these books he would understand why the surviving mid-Victorian fails to learn much from the reaction. I may add, what Swinburne would have confirmed, that, as Tennyson advanced in age, the lyrical verse, and in some degree the other verse, of the wonderful old poet freed itself more and more from the defects discussed above. And I take the opportunity to add further that, if I have made no mention in this lecture of Tennyson's dramas, it is not because I fail to admire and enjoy most of them, but merely because no one would base on them his claim to stand in the company of his immediate predecessors.

² I could not discuss in the lecture the merits and defects of In Memoriam, and I can add here only a brief note. The questionings and arguments in that poem, like the more emotional sections, are subsidiary to its main subject,

~~1.~~ *Maud* illustrates another characteristic of Tennyson's—one that we cannot wish away, but at the same time a source of danger. You know the distinction drawn between two strains in the Romantic Movement: the first, the more strictly 'romantic', best represented by Coleridge and Keats, with its love of picture and colour, the marvellous or mysterious, the far-away in time or place; the other, sometimes called 'naturalistic', of which Wordsworth, writing of the peasants around him, was the great exponent. Tennyson united these strains more completely than any of his predecessors. His poetic instinct, I think, impelled him most strongly in the more romantic direction. What first made his reputation in small circles, and still in the fifties most fascinated Rossetti and Morris, is to be found mainly in such poems as *Mariana*, the *Lady of Shalott*, the *Lotos-Eaters*, the *Dream of Fair Women*, *Morte d'Arthur*. But from the first he wrote also poems, usually much less good, dealing directly with the life of his own time; and, though we have only internal evidence to go upon, it seems to me that he must have formed the conviction (often expressed by others in later days) that a poet ought to speak to his generation about itself. Therefore he wrote the *English Idylls*, and later he wrote *Maud*, and fixed the date of the events in the time of the Crimean War. Therefore, also, in writing of subjects of the other kind, he almost always modernized them. The old stories of Arthur's death and of the Sleeping Beauty enchanted him; but when he re-told them he added Prologues and Epilogues which show his intention to modernize; and his *Lotos-Eaters* and *Ulysses* were certainly not meant to be those of Homer. It was not till he came to write the *Idylls of the King* that the danger of this tendency became pressing, but in an inverted form it may be seen perhaps in *The Princess*, where he tries to put a present-day or future-day problem into surroundings that belong to no earthly place or time.

In his poems of contemporary life Tennyson enlarged considerably the range of the social subject-matter used by his great predecessors. I can only give one example. With a little exaggeration one may

which is identical with that of *Maud*—the development of a soul through love, loss, and the conquest of loss. The treatment of this subject is very much deeper in *In Memoriam* than in *Maud*. On this side, indeed, *In Memoriam* seems to me, in point of originality and depth, much superior to any other long poem by Tennyson; and that its superiority here has not poetic value I cannot for a moment admit. That it is very defective as an 'organism' (which it does not claim to be) is obvious; and it has other defects. Perhaps my view, or feeling, may be indicated by the formula that it is the 'greatest' of the long poems, and *Maud* the 'best'.

say that the Englishwoman belonging to 'the nobility and gentry'—a person whom Shakespeare introduced often enough, usually under a foreign name—had for some time wellnigh vanished from serious poetry; for Crabbe did not often soar above the lower-middle class. Tennyson brought her back. He is reproached with doing so; but to do so was, in principle, a merit. His intention was not always well carried out, and I confess that I do not desire a closer acquaintance with Adeline or Lilian. But, to take two out of many instances, I think the stanzas *To Mary Boyle* one of the most perfect things he ever wrote, and an example of a kind of verse in which no contemporary approached him; and the stanzas beginning 'Come into the garden' were addressed to a girl leaving a ball-room 'in gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls', and their rhythm (Verrall told us) is meant to recall that of a polka. The weakness of character-drawing in *Maud* cannot affect those stanzas, or 'I have led her home', or 'O that 'twere possible'. When they are forgotten, *Romeo and Juliet* will be forgotten too.

After all this balancing and distinguishing, it would be a relief to me, as well as to you, if I ended with mere praise of what is greatest and highest in Tennyson's poetry. That I cannot do, but I will end with praise of a minor merit, which I think as indisputable as any poetical merit can be. It appears, though not solely, in his treatment of Nature. As regards that particular treatment of Nature which we associate with the name of Wordsworth, I should not think of comparing Tennyson either with Wordsworth or with Shelley: but I believe he is unsurpassed, and I suspect he is unequalled, among English poets in two things—one, the accuracy and delicacy of his perceptions; and the other, the felicity of his translation into language of that which he perceives. The first of these things is not specially distinctive of a poet; the second, though not by itself enough to make a poet great, is the distinction of a poet from other artists. Poetry is an art of language; and the born poet, of whatever size, is a person who has a peculiar gift for translating his experiences—whatever he sees, hears, feels, imagines, thinks—into metrical language, a special necessity in his nature to do this, and a unique joy in doing it well. The universe, we may say, is for him an invitation or a challenge to such expression. Well, just now we are concerned with sense-experiences, and especially those that come from Nature; and I repeat that here Tennyson seems to me unsurpassed and perhaps unequalled among our poets in the accuracy and delicacy of his perceptions, and in the felicity of his translation into language of that

which he perceives.¹ As to the latter you may perhaps recall Ruskin's emphatic statement: 'Tennyson's "Rivulet" [he means *The Brook*] is far beyond anything I ever did, or could have done, in beauty of description.' As to the former you will certainly remember how attention was called in *Cranford* to the line,

More black than ash-buds in the front of March,

and how, since then, this line has been quoted *ad nauseam* as though it were something exceptional. In reality it is an example, and not a remarkable one, of something ubiquitous in Tennyson. If a man who had derived great happiness from the observation of nature were stricken with blindness or confined for the rest of his life to a sick-room, and if he were condemned to lose his recollection of all poets but one, Tennyson's is the poetry he should choose to keep. There, for example, he could follow the progress of spring, from the beginning when

Once more the Heavenly Power
Makes all things new,
And domes the red-plowed hills
With loving blue;

when rosy plumelets tuft the larch, and a million emeralds break from the ruby-budded lime, and the ruddy-hearted blossom-flakes flutter down from the elm in tens of thousands; when the satin-shining palms appear on sallows in the windy gleams, and, later, a gust strikes the yew and puffs the swaying branches into smoke, and all the wood stands in a mist of green, till, later still, as you cross the wood you pass through a green gloom. Or, again, Tennyson will bring back to him the coming of the storm; its green malignant light near the horizon; then the ragged rims of thunder brooding low, with shadow-streaks of rain; and then the blasts that blow the poplar white and lash with storm the streaming pane; the stammering cracks and claps, the bellowing of the tempest, and at last the sounds of its retreat into the distance, moaning and calling out of other lands. Or, if he has loved the sea, with Tennyson he may still watch, on a windless day, the crisping ripples on the beach, and tender curving lines of creamy spray; or, on a windy one, crisp foam-flakes scudding along the level sand; or may recall from memories of the open sea a huge wave, green-glimmering towards the summit, with all its stormy crests that smoke against the skies. It will be just the same with him if he thinks of sunrise and sunset; of the nightingale

¹ Since this lecture was given, two excellent papers by Mr. Morton Luce on *Nature in Tennyson* (Birds and Trees) have appeared in the *British Review* (1915)

or the thrush (whose voice has so become speech in *The Thrustle* that, as he remembers it, he will laugh for amusement and joy); or of the mother-dog with her blind and shuddering puppies, or the rabbit fondling his own harmless face. And, as our invalid lies awake through the night in his sick-room, he may remember Tennyson when the grandfather clocks in rooms beneath throb thunder through the floors, and may remember Tennyson again as the dawn approaches and the casement slowly grows a glimmering square.

These are a few examples of what I mean, out of hundreds. Well, my friend of the reaction will not find in the poetic virtue shown in them the deepest and highest that poetry can reach or that this poet can reach; but, he will not belittle it if he loves nature and knows what poetry is. Let him enjoy it, if he can enjoy nothing else in Tennyson. And if he enjoys and reveres science too (from a closer acquaintance, I hope, than mine), perhaps he will consider favourably the last claim that I urge on behalf of this poet. We live, and civilized man must continue to live, in an age of science. But, with the partial exception of Shelley, Tennyson is the only one of our great poets whose attitude towards the sciences of Nature was what a modern poet's attitude ought to be; the only one whose words constantly come to your mind as you read, if you can get no farther, your manual of astronomy¹ or geology; the only one to whose habitual way of seeing, imagining, or thinking, it makes any real difference that Laplace, or for that matter Copernicus, ever lived. He gazed too, without flinching, on aspects of Nature which Wordsworth did not face; and in this also the poetry of the future must surely follow him. One may hope that courage and faithfulness like his will not prevent it, as it prevented him, from sharing Wordsworth's intuition of

A central peace, subsisting at the heart
Of endless agitation.

But, however that may be, when we have again a poetry of Nature equal to Wordsworth's, it will have to be, in his own phrase, 'the inspired expression that is in the countenance of all science', and it will look back with gratitude to Tennyson.

¹ Readers who may be interested in Tennyson's very numerous astronomical passages will find a full treatment of the subject by Mr. C. T. Whitmell in the *Journal and Transactions of the Leeds Astronomical Society* for 1906.



17. The Teaching of English Composition. By J. H. Fowler, M.A. (Out of print.) Price 1s.
18. The Teaching of Literature in French and German Secondary Schools. By Elizabeth Lee. (Out of print.) Price 6d.
19. John Bunyan. / By C. H. Firth, LL.D. (Out of print.) Price 1s.
20. The Uses of Poetry. By A. C. Bradley, Litt.D. Price 1s.
21. English Literature in Schools. A list of Authors and Works for Successive Stages of Study. Price 1s.
22. Some Characteristics of Scots Literature. By J. C. Smith. Price 1s.
23. Short Bibliographies of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats. Price 1s.
24. A Discourse on Modern Sibyls. By Lady Ritchie. Price 1s.
25. The Future of English Poetry. By Edmund Gosse, C.B. Price 1s.
26. The Teaching of English at the Universities. By Stanley Leathes. With a note by W. P. Ker. Price 1s.
27. Poetry and Contemporary Speech. By Lascelles Abercrombie. Price 1s.
28. The Poet and the Artist and what they can do for us. By Professor G. C. Moore Smith, Litt.D. Price 1s.
29. Bibliographies of Swinburne, Morris, and Rossetti. By Professor C. E. Vaughan. Price 1s.
30. Wordsworth's Patriotic Poems and their Significance To-day. By F. S. Boas, LL.D. Price 1s.
31. The Use of Comic Episodes in Tragedy. By W. H. Hadow, M.A. Price 1s.
32. On Concentration and Suggestion in Poetry. By Sir Sidney Colvin, D.Litt. Price 1s.
33. School Libraries. By J. H. Fowler, M.A. Price 1s.
34. Poetry and the Child. By J. Dover Wilson. Price 1s.
35. The Eighteenth Century. By W. P. Ker, LL.D. Price 1s.
36. Poetry in the Light of War. By C. F. E. Spurgeon. Price 1s.
37. English Papers in Examinations for Pupils of School Age in England and Wales. Price 1s.
38. War and English Poetry. By the Most Hon. the Marquess of Crewe, K.G. Price 1s.
39. The Reaction against Tennyson. By A. C. Bradley, Litt.D. Price 1s.

Members can obtain further copies of the *Bulletin* (price 6d.) on application to the Secretary.

Any member having copies to spare of Pamphlets Nos. 1, 2, 6, 8, and 17, is requested to communicate with the Secretary.

Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association.
Vol. I. Collected by A. C. Bradley. Clarendon Press.
2s. 6d. to members.

Contents:—English Place-names, by Henry Bradley; On the Present State of English Pronunciation, by Robert Bridges; Browning, by W. P. Ker; Blind Harry's 'Wallace', by George Neilson; Shakespeare and the Grand Style, by George Saintsbury; Some Suggestions about Bad Poetry, by Edith Sichel; Carlyle and his German Masters, by C. E. Vaughan.

Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association.
Vol. II. Collected by Dr. Beeching. Clarendon Press.
2s. 6d. to members.

Contents:—The Particle *ing* in Place-names, by H. Alexander; On the Nature of the Grand Style, by John Bailey; Richardson's Novels and their Influences, by F. S. Boas; Jane Austen, by A. C. Bradley; Description in Poetry, by A. Clutton Brock; The Literary Play, by C. E. Montague; A Yorkshire Folk-Play and its Analogues, by F. Moorman.

Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association.
Vol. III. Collected by W. P. Ker. Clarendon Press.
2s. 6d. to members.

Contents:—What English Poetry may still learn from Greek, by Gilbert Murray; Some Childish Things, by A. A. Jack; *A Lover's Complaint*, by J. W. Mackail; Arnold and Homer, by T. S. Omond; Keats's Epithets, by David Watson Rannie; Dante and the Grand Style, by George Saintsbury; Blake's Religious Lyrica, by H. C. Beeching.

Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association.
Vol. IV. Collected by C. H. Herford. Clarendon Press.
2s. 6d. to members.

Contents:—A Note on Dramatic Criticism, by J. E. Spingarn; English Prose Numbers, by O. Elton; Some Unconsidered Elements in English Place-names, by A. Mawer; Platonism in Shelley, by L. Winstanley; Defoe's *True-born Englishman*, by A. C. Guthkelch; The Plays of Mr. John Galsworthy, by A. R. Skemp; Dramatic Technique in Marlowe, by G. P. Baker.

Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association.
Vol. V. Collected by Oliver Elton. Clarendon Press.
2s. 6d. to members.

Contents:—Rhythm in English Verse, Prose, and Speech, by D. S. MacColl; The Novels of Mark Rutherford, by A. E. Taylor; English Place-names and Teutonic Sagas, by F. W. Moorman; Shelley's *Triumph of Life*, by F. Melian Stawell; Emily Brontë, by J. C. Smith; Translation from Old into Modern English, by A. Blyth Webster.

Poems of To-day. An Anthology. Published for the English Association by Sidgwick & Jackson, Ltd. Price 2s.

PR
5588
B65
cop.2

Bradley, Andrew Cecil
The reaction against
Tennyson

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY

